
CHAPTER XVIII

THE RECENT ALTERATIONS AND PROPOSED ADDITIONS TO THE CAPITOL

BY JOINT RESOLUTION of Congress June 6, 1900, the portion of the Capitol embraced by the central projection on the west, which was vacated by the Congressional Library when it removed into its new building, was ordered to be divided into committee rooms for the use of the Senate and House of Representatives. The resolution did not put a limit on the cost of the alteration, simply stating "And such sum as is necessary to make the construction herein provided for is hereby appropriated out of any money in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated."¹ Immediately upon the adjournment of Congress the old alcoves, shelves, and ceilings of the Library were removed and the work of alteration commenced.

The plan of the committee rooms is simple and direct [Plates 270, 271, 272]. All partitions are of brick and the ceilings are of brick vaulting, carrying out the same style of construction as that adopted in the old parts of the building. The principal hall [Plates 273, 273a] is cased with marble, with the stairway from the west entrance running between marble colonnades. An elaborate marble and bronze stairway was erected leading from the principal to the attic story during this improvement. As it interfered to a certain extent with the doorway leading to the west central portico it has been removed. This alteration of the old Library gives two stories of committee rooms, and a space under the roof which it is proposed to make into a reference library for Senators and Representatives. The changes in this portion of the building neces-

sitated a change in the heating apparatus. The principal lines were carried through a duct beneath the floor and a single-pipe system used for the radiators. This alteration gave Congress a much-needed addition to its committee-room space.

The need for additional room has been the cause of several proposed additions to the Capitol, the most interesting of which are two designs by Thomas U. Walter in 1874 and one design by Smithmeyer & Pelz, presented January 15, 1881. In one of the plans submitted by Walter [Plate 274] he proposes to extend the east front of the old building 275 feet east and to build a portico similar to the porticoes on the extensions. From this proposed central portico a long corridor with a colonnade on each side was to lead to the central Rotunda. Two large open courts were placed on either side of this corridor. Around these courts were grouped the committee and other rooms for the use of Congress.

The perspective [Plate 275] shows how this extension in ordinary views of the building would throw all of the completed portions of the Capitol out of balance. The Dome would not be in the center from any view of the building from the east, except in the case of a direct front view, nor in any view from the north or the south. The central portion would overshadow the wings to such an extent as to belittle them.

The second scheme submitted by Walter was very much more satisfactory. The plan [Plate 276] contemplated an addition on both the east and the west of the old building, having only a slight projection beyond the wings on either side.

In this plan a colonnade extended in a broken line along the full width of the east front, with a portico similar to the porticoes on the wings. On the west front he placed a similar central portico without the

¹ "Joint Resolution Relating to the Use of the Rooms Lately Occupied by the Congressional Library in the Capitol," 56th Cong., 1st sess., in *United States Statutes at Large*, vol. 31, 719.

long and broad flights of steps which are such prominent features of the eastern entrances.

The perspective [Plate 277] shows a very dignified and well-balanced structure, with the Dome as a central feature, the building having a harmonious appearance from all directions. The central portion and the wings group well together and appear as legitimate parts of one structure. The slight recess between the wings and the main building gives very little depth of shadow and obliterates the fore court, which is one of the effective features of the present structure. These designs were hastily prepared at the request of the Committee on the Library and were only preliminary studies, which would have been matured and altered by Walter in the preparation of the working drawings.²

The plans of Walter did not contemplate a change in the rooms of the old building, but left intact the old Hall of Representatives and the Supreme Court room, as well as the committee rooms. The east and west fronts of the old building were thus made to front on interior courts instead of looking into the Capitol grounds.

J. L. Smithmeyer and Paul J. Pelz submitted a design [Plate 278] for alterations in the central building in which the old Hall of Representatives and Senate Chamber (Supreme Court room) were obliterated. New apartments were planned for the Supreme Court, the Attorney-General, and the Court of Claims, as well as a caucus room. Four grand stairways were provided in the space between the main building and the wings. The only portions of the old building left were the Rotunda and the Dome. The perspective of this design [Plate 279] shows a well-balanced structure with the Dome in the center. The front

²During the period Walter prepared these drawings he had suffered financial setbacks and needed the work. He was also pursuing a claim for compensation for architectural services above and beyond his duties as Architect of the Capitol Extension. See William C. Allen, *The Dome of the United States Capitol: An Architectural History* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1992), 75.

of the central extensions is divided into three portions—a central portico with two corner pavilions. Each corner pavilion has two corner towers, forming turrets capped by small domes. In this way eight small domes extend above the roof line and are subordinate to the principal central Dome. The exterior dignity and repose of the building would be more or less marred by this addition of small domes, and the front is broken up by too great a variety of treatment.

The erection of an independent office structure for the House of Representatives, now in process of accomplishment under the act of March 3, 1903, will provide additional room for the use of Congress, and it seems probable that a Senate office building will be erected and the Supreme Court will be located in a separate structure.

On the afternoon of Sunday, November 6, 1898, the portion of the Capitol occupied by the Supreme Court (the old Senate wing) was damaged by an explosion, which was followed by a fire of considerable magnitude. The character of the construction of the old building, which was of solid masonry piers and brick vaulting, the form of construction best adapted to resist both explosion and fire, prevented this portion of the building with its contents from being completely destroyed on this occasion. On the morning after the explosion Edward Clark, Architect of the Capitol, requested Glenn Brown, architect, and Charles Munroe, expert on explosives, to make an investigation as to the cause and effects of the explosion and fire.

The reports on the explosion by these gentlemen, together with that of the Architect of the Capitol, were published in the latter's report of June 30, 1899.³ They contain, besides a carefully prepared description of damages and recommendations for reconstruction, 6 sheets of diagrams and 44 reproductions of photographs illustrating the effects

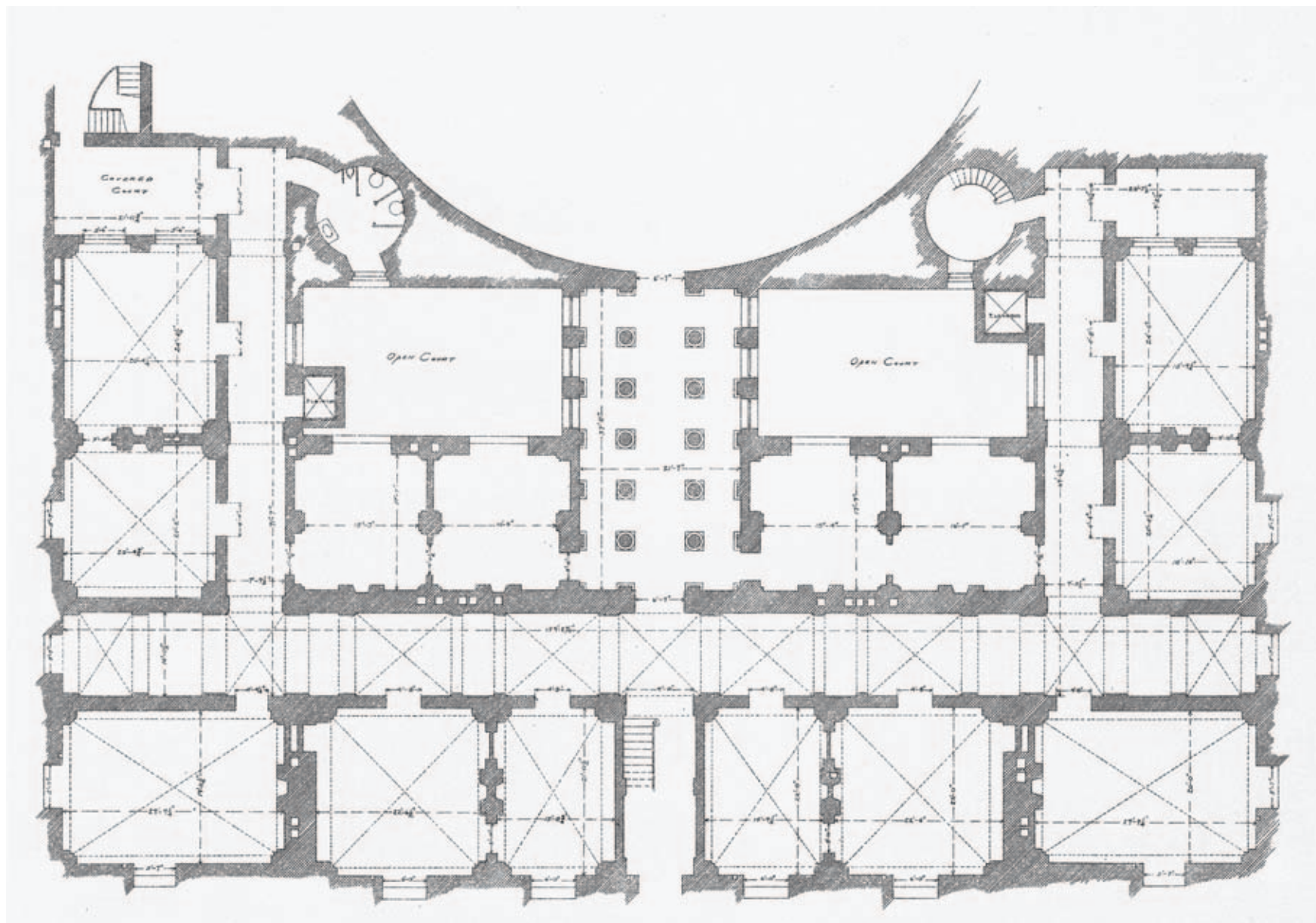
³*Annual Report of the Architect of the United States Capitol to the Secretary of the Interior, for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1899* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899), 20–44.

of the explosion and the fire which followed. On all material points the reports show an agreement as to the cause, effects, and necessary repairs, although the investigations were made independently.

The explosion took place in one or more of the compartments in the cellar under the small rotunda north of the central building. From this space the effects produced by the explosion could be seen radiating north as far as the end of the old building, south beyond the center line of the principal Rotunda, west to the west front of the old building, and east to the east front of the old building. The space in the cellar where the explosion took place was approximately 47,000 cubic feet. Of this area 37,000 cubic feet, although divided into numerous rooms and compartments, was practically one chamber, as all the compartments communicated directly by open doorways. Ten thousand cubic feet of space was separated from the above by lightly built walls or doors which were not a part of the construction and therefore easily overthrown. The explosion exerted its greatest energy in the small

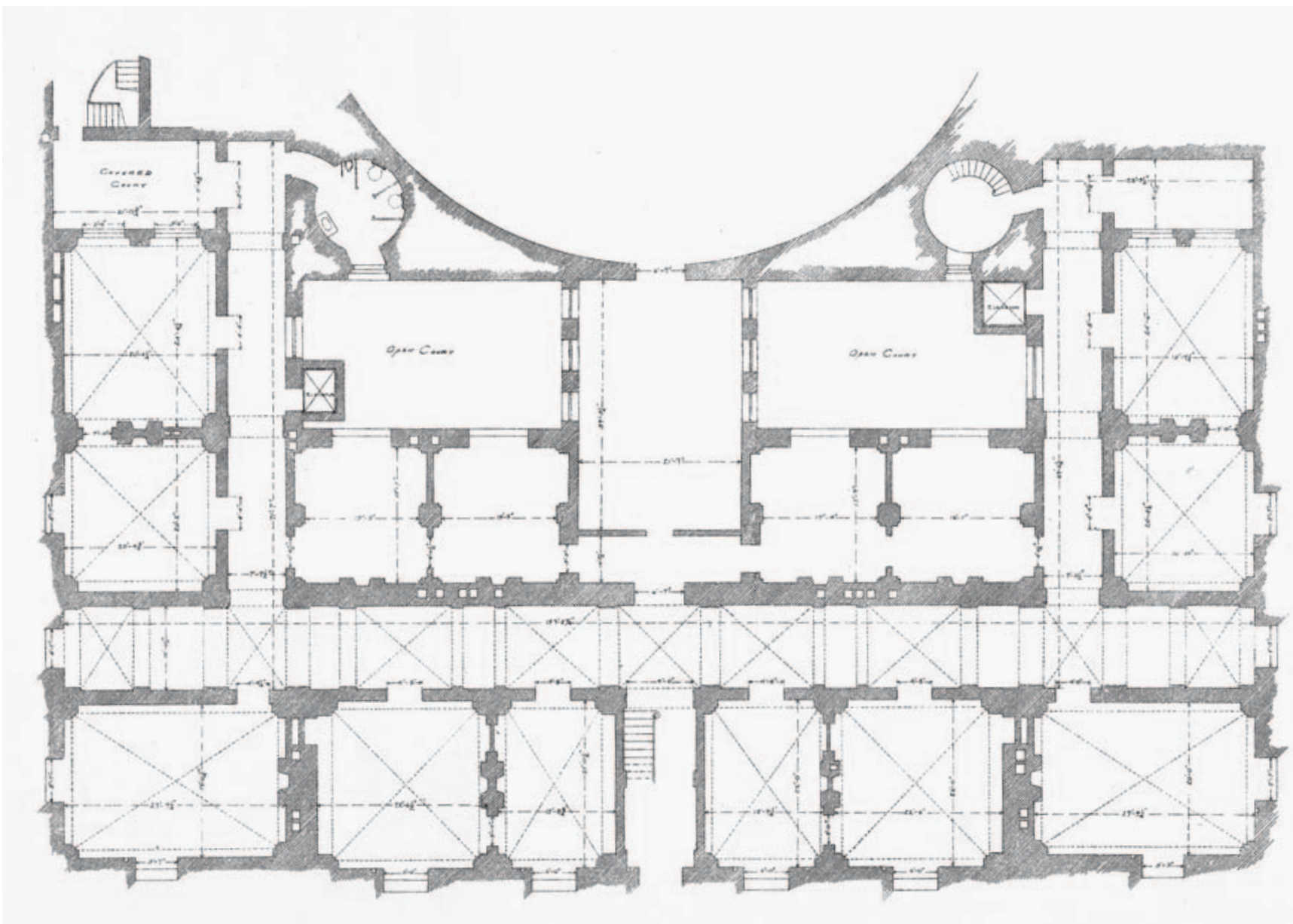
rotunda, in the vestibule east of this rotunda, and in the rooms just west of it, where the massive brick vaulting and the stone flagging were blown up, leaving large areas open to the cellar. The fire resulting from the explosion destroyed many papers in the cellar, as well as the furniture and fittings in the rooms adjoining the Supreme Court room on the south, and in the rooms on the principal and second stories occupied by the court officers on the west side of the building. The fire passed through the roof in the stairway hall, burning the wooden skylights and the woodwork at the base of the Dome.

This explosion occurred so near the time for Congress to assemble that it required great expedition to make the necessary repairs before it met. Elliott Woods, assistant to Mr. Clark, by employing workmen day and night succeeded in having all the débris removed, the vaulting and floors relaid, and the plastering done, so that the building was in condition to receive Congress at its regular time of meeting.



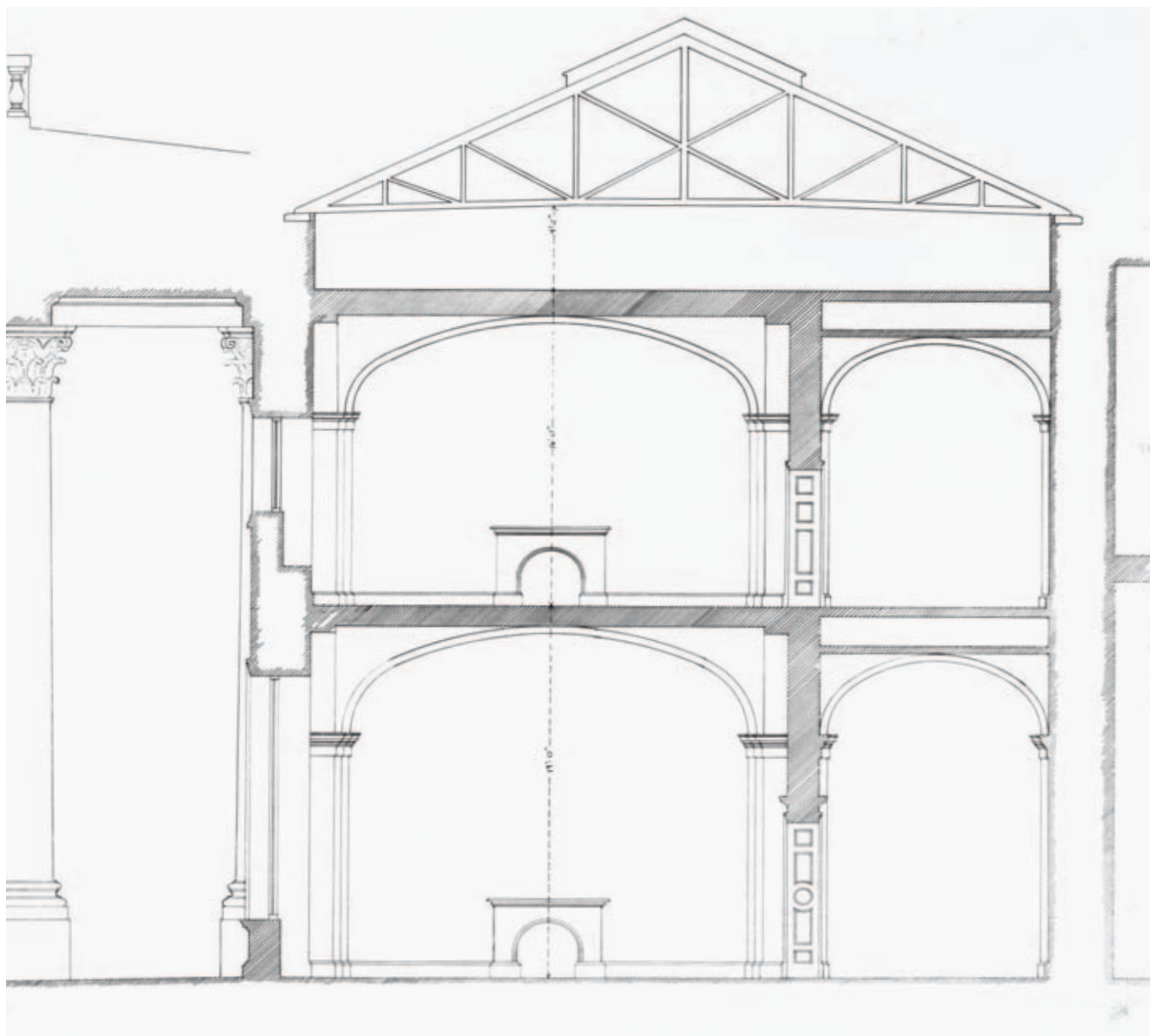
COMMITTEE ROOMS IN SPACE FORMERLY OCCUPIED BY CONGRESSIONAL LIBRARY,—PRINCIPAL STORY PLAN.

1900 drawing prepared under the direction of Elliott Woods, Acting Architect of the Capitol.



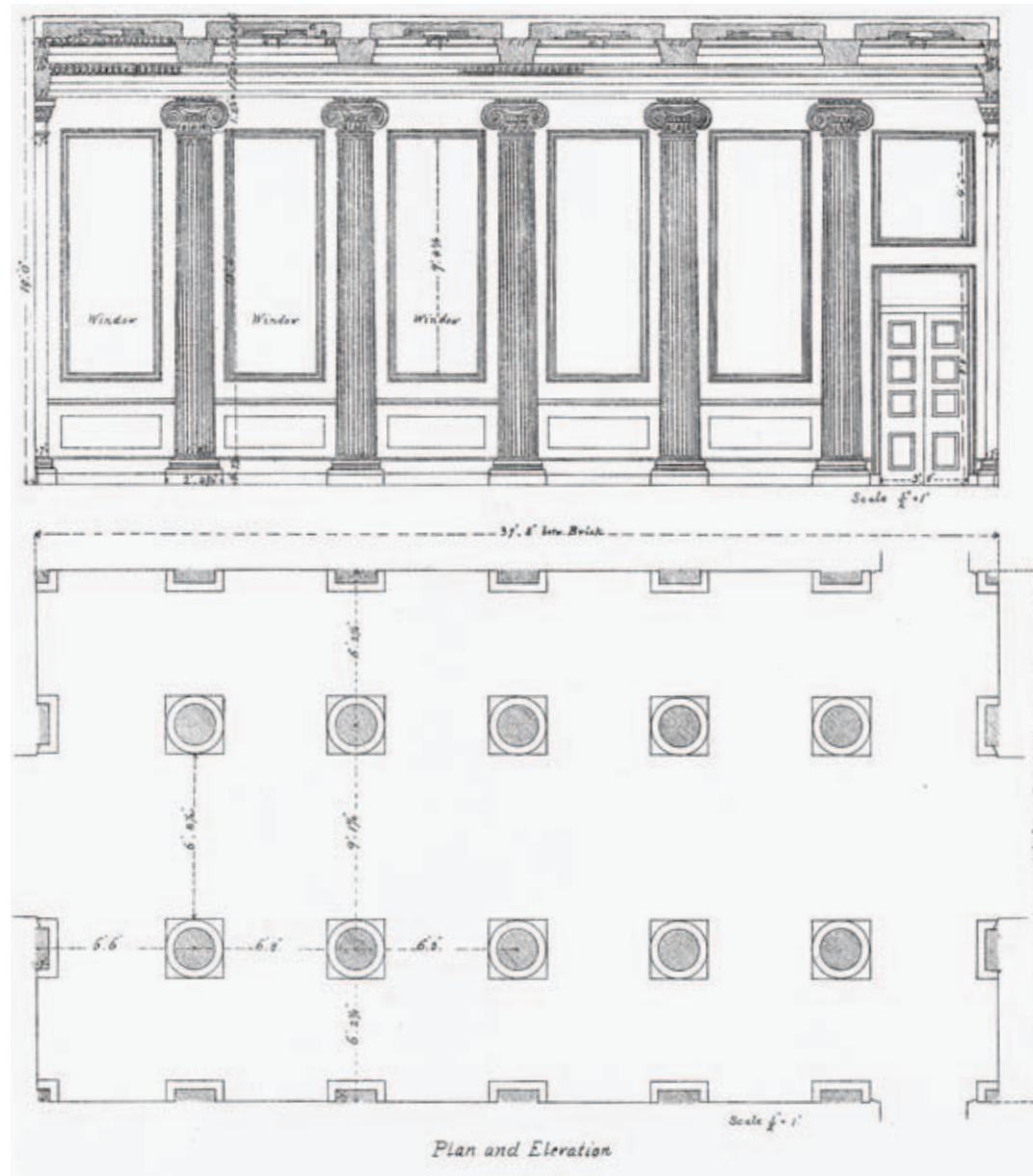
COMMITTEE ROOMS IN SPACE FORMERLY OCCUPIED BY CONGRESSIONAL LIBRARY,—ATTIC STORY PLAN.

1900 drawing prepared under the direction of Elliott Woods, Acting Architect of the Capitol.



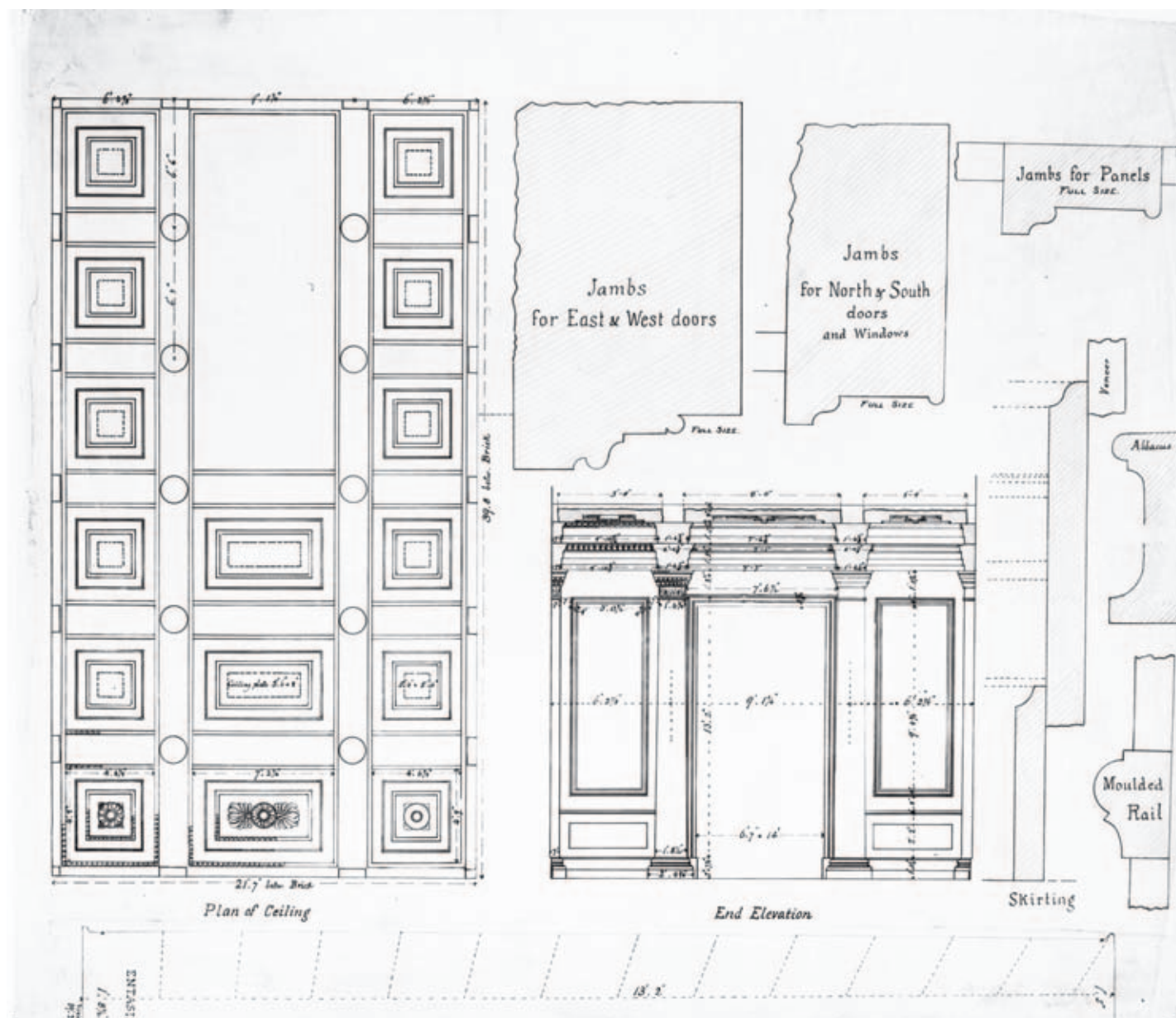
COMMITTEE ROOMS IN SPACE FORMERLY OCCUPIED BY CONGRESSIONAL LIBRARY,—SECTION.

1900 drawing prepared under the direction of Elliott Woods, Acting Architect of the Capitol.



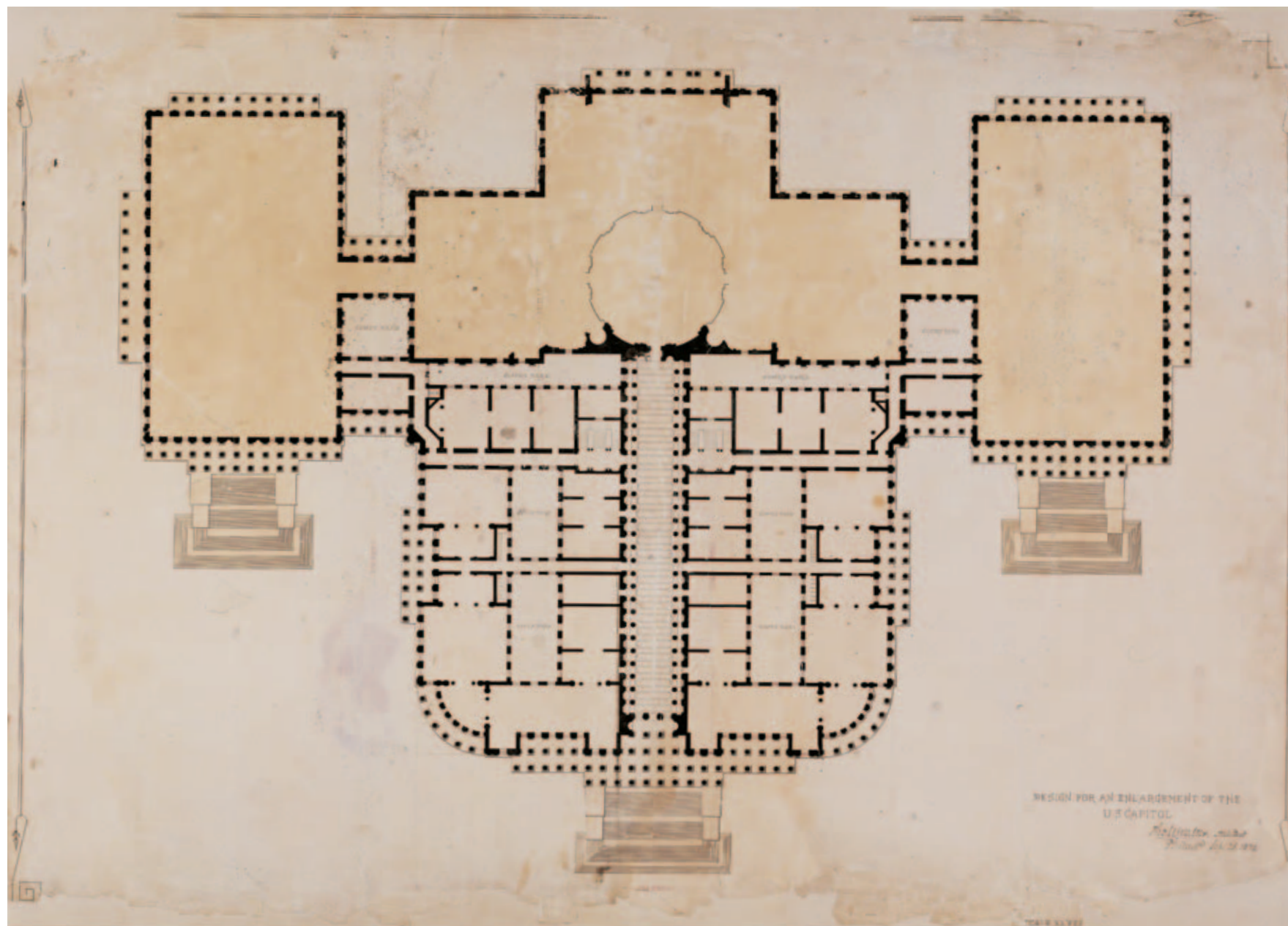
COLONNADE FROM ROTUNDA TO NEW COMMITTEE ROOMS.

1900 drawing prepared under the direction of Elliott Woods, Acting Architect of the Capitol.



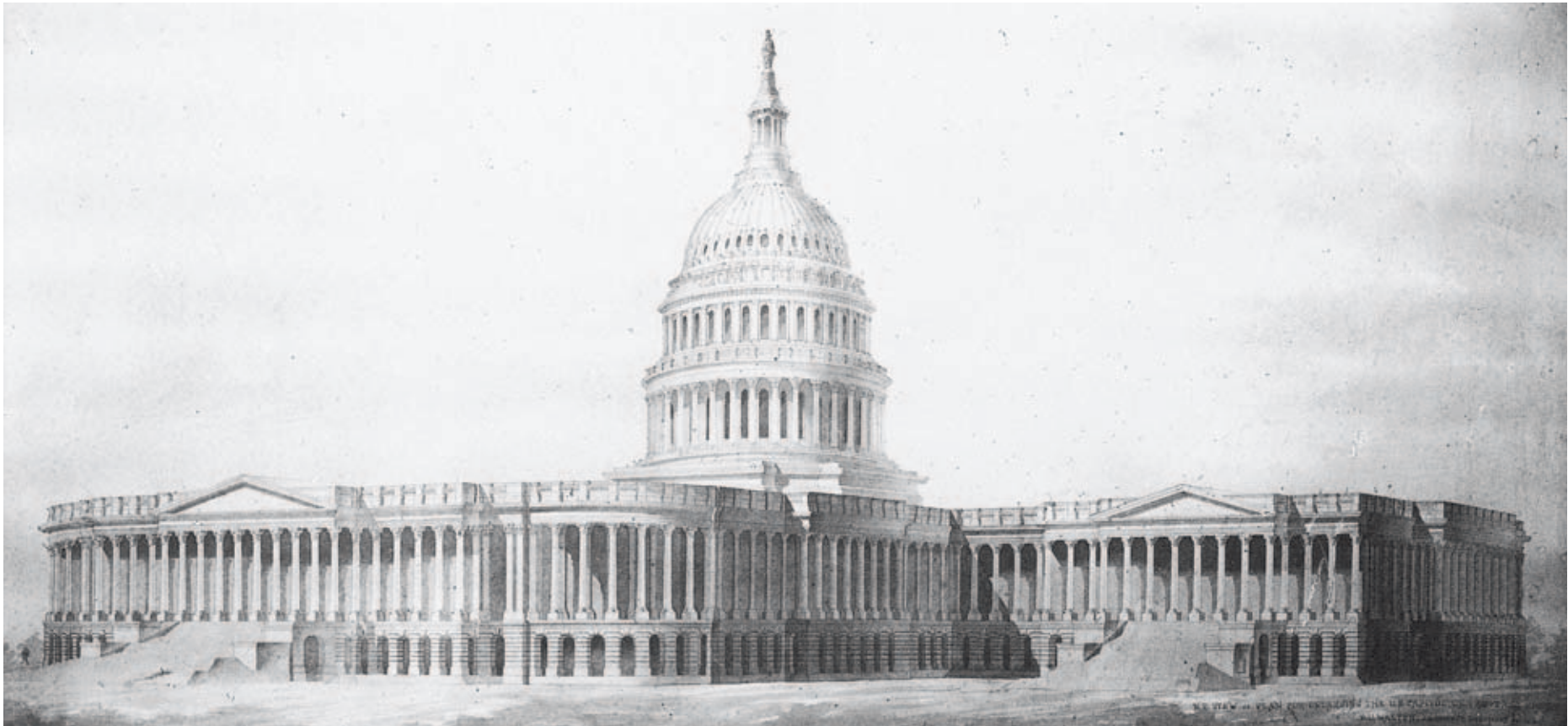
CEILING AND WALL PANELLING IN CORRIDOR LEADING TO NEW COMMITTEE ROOMS.

1900 drawing prepared under the direction of Elliott Woods, Acting Architect of the Capitol.



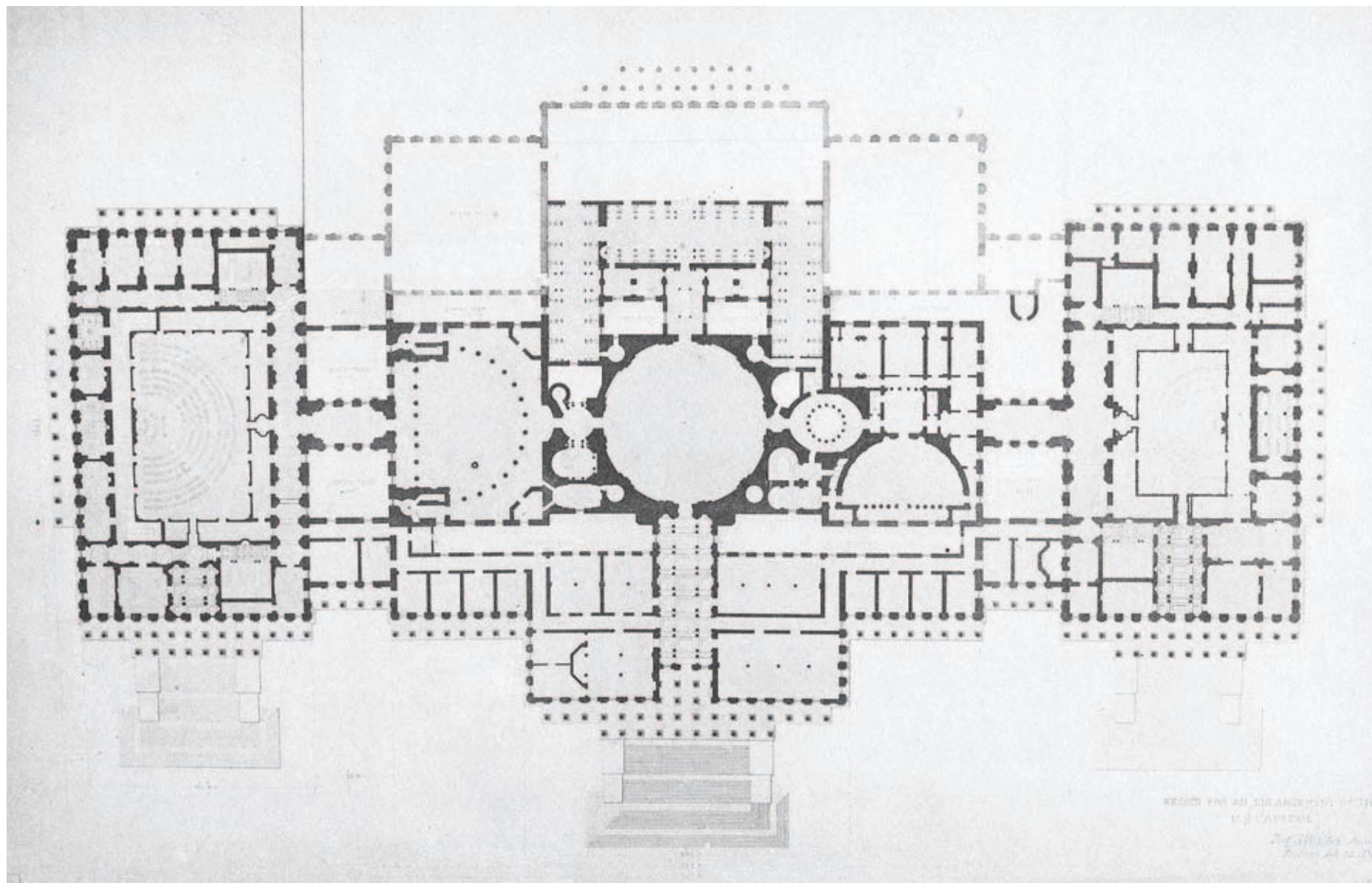
DESIGN FOR ENLARGEMENT OF THE CAPITOL 1874, PLAN OF PRINCIPAL STORY—T. U. WALTER ARCHITECT.

Walter's proposed design was never implemented.



PLAN FOR ENLARGEMENT OF THE CAPITOL 1874, PERSPECTIVE VIEW—T. U. WALTER ARCHITECT.

Perseptive drawing illustrating Walter's proposed extension to the east (related drawing, plate 274).



DESIGN FOR THE EXTENSION OF THE CENTER OF THE CAPITOL,—T. U. WALTER, ARCHITECT, 1874.

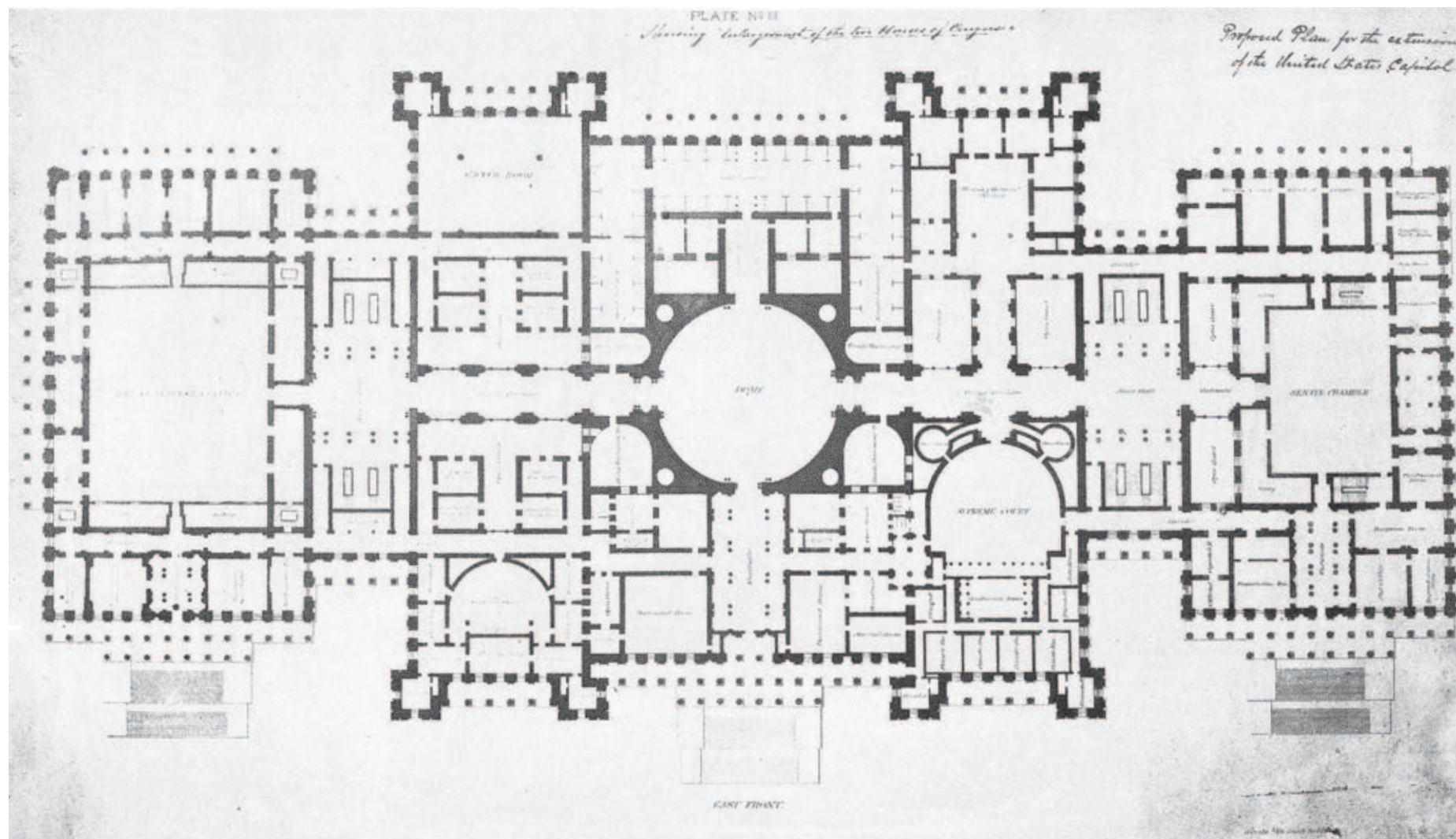
Walter's proposed design was never implemented.



DESIGN FOR THE EXTENSION OF THE CENTRAL PORTION OF THE CAPITOL, PERSPECTIVE VIEW,—T. U. WALTER, ARCHITECT, 1874.

Perspective drawing illustrating Walter's proposed extension of the center of the Capitol to the east

(related drawing, plate 276). *Location unknown.*



PROPOSED PLAN FOR EXTENDING CENTER OF THE CAPITOL,—SMITHMEYER & PELZ, ARCHITECTS.

This plan accompanied the perspective illustrated in plate 279. Brown noted in the text that the design was prepared in 1881. *Location unknown.*



DESIGN FOR THE EXTENSION OF THE CENTRAL PORTION OF THE CAPITOL, PERSPECTIVE,—J. L. SMITHMEYER & P. J. PELZ, ARCHITECTS.

Brown may have obtained a copy of this drawing from Paul J. Pelz. *Prints and Photographs Division, LC.*